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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement submitted by Pax Christi International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 February 1999]

An appeal to end religious intolerance

1. Pax Christi International condemns all instances of religious intolerance and manifestations of violence against victims distinguishable only by their religious beliefs. The present document will focus on recent violent incidents against minorities in India and Pakistan. Pax Christi International has Executive Committee members and affiliated organizations in these two countries who keep our International Secretariat informed of the situation and work in their respective nations trying to spread the message of religious tolerance and supporting victims of religious attacks. We limit our concerns, in this statement, to religious intolerance in India and Pakistan. It is imperative to note that Pax Christi is aware that many countries throughout the world can record cases of religious intolerance within their jurisdiction.

India

2. Religious violence has been escalating in parts of India. Of India's population of 950 million, about 82 per cent are Hindu, 12 per cent Muslims, and Christians and Sikhs each make up about 2 per cent.

3. According to sources, there were over 90 attacks against religious minorities in 1998, with 38 in the State of Gujarat alone. In September 1998 an extreme Hindu group announced a campaign seeking the expulsion of Christian missionaries from India. On 4 December 1998 the Christian minority held a nation-wide protest day to focus the attention of the Government and the people of India on the spate of violence against Christians and the continuing effort by some fanatical elements to demolish the secular character of the State. In response, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee issued a statement that "India is a secular nation. Equal respect for all faiths has been the cornerstone of our culture and nationhood. My Government is fully committed to upholding this principle." However, the number of attacks continues to grow. On Christmas day churches, hospitals and schools were targeted in the Dangs district of Gujarat. Fundamentalist Hindus held a rally on Christmas day calling for an awakening of the Hindus and branded all priests and nuns "robbers" who abused government funds to build schools for converting tribal communities. There have been other clashes in Gujarat where Hindu fundamentalist groups have attacked schools and churches run by Christian missionaries.

4. Prime Minister Vajpayee visited areas in Gujarat in mid-January and urged stiff punishment for those behind attacks on the Christian minority. The violence is occurring particularly in the district of Dangs, with a population of 200,000, of whom 6,000 are Christians. Vajpayee has also called for debate on conversions to Christianity. The United Christian Forum for Human Rights says that debate is welcome but it must involve all - Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs.

5. The violence has occurred mostly in the north and west where extreme Hindu nationalist groups have wider support. These extremists condemn the conversion of Hindus by Muslims and Christians. They also allege that the social and educational services provided by these other religions are an excuse to convert. The violence has been launched on three fronts - direct

violence against the clergy, attacks on evangelists and disruption of prayer meetings, and pressure from municipal authorities on Christian institutions, including schools, colleges, hospitals and churches, regarding land permits and charges of encroachment.

6. India's Catholic bishops have complained to the head of State, President K.R. Narayanan, that the country's Christians are being subjected to "an unmitigated and unchecked hate campaign" with well-organized political backing. The Indian Government's attitude towards the crisis has been deplored by an assistant editor of The Times of India. In the paper's issue of 8 January 1999, Siddarth Varadarajan wrote that "senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders continue to prevaricate and dissemble". They criticized the violence, he said, but included "toxic sermons on the evils of Christian missionaries and religious conversion". He went on to cite the case of the Information and Broadcasting Minister, Pramod Mahajan. Even as he made a show of condemning attacks on Christians in Gujarat, the Minister accused Christian missionaries of "indulging in conversion under the garb of service to the poor".

7. Mr. Vajpayee's rightist Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party rose to power on a blend of Hindutva ("Hindu-ness") and moderation but in November the party rated poorly in the elections. Since then Mr. Vajpayee and the party's pragmatists have tried to tame the hard-line Hindu ideologues of the party's parent organization. However, human rights organizations in India are apprehensive that Mr. Vajpayee's failure to condemn the right-wing Hindu nationalist Sangh Pravier's violence against Christians will strengthen the monolithic revivalist and violent Hindutva agenda in the country. Unless fundamentalist organizations such as the Hindu Jagran Manch, Bajrang Dal and Hindu Parisad are indicted for intimidating minorities, it will be impossible to generate an environment for sane and peaceful debate.

8. The terror campaign against Christians in India took a horrific turn on 24 January 1999 with the burning to death in Orissa, Gujarat, of a 55-year-old Australian missionary and his two sons, aged 10 and 8. Many of the mob who inflicted the violence were chanting Hindu slogans in support of the extreme movement Bajrang Dal, which is linked to the governing BJP. The missionary, Graham Staines, had been working with leprosy patients in India for more than 30 years and was the secretary and treasurer of the Evangelical Missionary Society of Mayurbhanj, near the place where the crime was committed. The mob which attacked and surrounded the jeep was said to be between 50 and 100 strong. Villagers who tried to help the missionary were attacked and repelled.

9. India's 1950 Constitution, under the heading of Fundamental Rights, Part III, guarantees the right to freedom of religion. The basic structure of the Constitution promises freedom to profess and propagate any religion or faith. Pax Christi International calls on the Government of India to respect the terms of the Constitution and work to put an end to the violence that prevents religious minorities from realizing these freedoms.

Pakistan

10. In Pakistan, religious minorities are subjected to discrimination with sanction from socio-political structures, the Constitution of Pakistan and other laws. Religious intolerance assumes many forms. Sometimes it is expressed through derogatory attitudes, the depriving of education or physical maltreatment; other times it is dismissal from a job or institution through false charges brought under laws pertaining to religious offences.

11. Bishop John Joseph, Bishop of Faisalabad, was the first Punjabi to become a Catholic bishop in Pakistan. He was Vice-President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan and Chairman of the Human Rights Commission established by the Conference. He devoted himself to the struggle for human rights for the poor and victims of injustice, campaigned against the blasphemy legislation enacted in his country, and always believed in active non-violence. He successfully spearheaded a campaign against an unjust law introduced against minorities that would have required religion to be indicated on the national identity card. Bishop John Joseph stated that the card "would make religious discrimination not only actual, but official, and minorities second-class citizens".

12. Bishop John Joseph opposed the introduction of section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code. This makes punishable by death: "the use of derogatory remarks etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet: whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him)". Since this section was added as an amendment in 1986, blasphemy cases have multiplied. Often the charges are found to be fraudulent, yet no action is taken against those who make the false claims. Bishop John Joseph, in a speech in Vienna in March 1998 stated that: "The reason why we are targeting the death sentence in 295-C is because it is the greatest obstacle in Christian-Muslim relations." In a speech to be read in Rome on 5 May 1998, he wrote: "I shall count myself fortunate if in this mission of breaking barriers our Lord accepts the sacrifice of my blood for the benefit of his people."

13. He wrote letters urging bishops, parliamentarians, NGOs, Muslims, Christians and all sections of society to act in unity to get the death sentence of a Christian, Ayub Masih, quashed and the law repealed. On the evening of 6 May the Bishop was very depressed about the condemnation of Ayub and others imprisoned under the blasphemy laws. After leading a prayer service to seek God's help for Ayub's release, John Joseph went to the courthouse of Sahiwal, and upon confirming that this was the place where Ayub Masih had been condemned a few days earlier, shot himself in the head.

14. Pax Christi International wants to ensure that Bishop John Joseph's sacrifice was not in vain, that the struggle against injustice continues, and that the spirit of non-violent protests will endure.

15. Exclusivist tendencies among both Christians and Muslims do not permit real dialogue or sharing of religious experience. Sometimes, Christians seemingly exude a superiority complex, regarding themselves as better off and more advanced than Muslims, whereas on some occasions, Muslims appear to look

down on Christians and treat them with disdain. In Pakistan, it is not only stereotypes that hamper peaceful interreligious coexistence. The Pakistani Government must ensure that section 295-C is not misused as a personal vendetta against enemies. Judges are often pressured for a conviction with threats of being killed themselves. The only way to guarantee fairness and equality is through the repeal of section 295-C.

16. In 1998 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted, without a vote, resolution 1998/18 on implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Note that it urged States to ensure that no one within their jurisdiction is deprived of the right to life or the right to liberty and security of person because of religion or belief, or is subjected to torture or arbitrary detention on that account. States must ensure that religious places, sites and shrines are fully respected and protected, and must promote through the educational system, and other means, understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief.

17. In both India and Pakistan religious minorities are suffering from violations of these terms. The State cannot be powerless to cease this discrimination. Minorities are crying out for relief from religious persecution. Interreligious dialogue is vital to the prevention of violent attacks, and it must begin now before more people are killed, and religious communities victimized in the name of religious intolerance.

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